

## Introduction

The Sonoma County Innovation Action Council (IAC) is composed of a cross-section of representatives from business, non-profit, education, and labor. The Council was formed in 2008 (as simply the Innovation Council) for the purpose of addressing unprecedented changes in a number of areas, including workforce, global competitiveness and natural resources.

Since 2008, the IAC has achieved the following:

- Developed Sonoma County's first-ever strategic plan for the economy
- Identified five-key industry clusters with greatest potential to drive employment and economic vitality:
  1. Sonoma Specialties (wine, tourism, craft economy)
  2. Advanced manufacturing/R&D
  3. Health and Wellness
  4. Green Industries/Construction; and
  5. Professional Services
- Facilitated cluster focus group sessions to identify barriers to success, industry growth and job creation
- Distilled data gathered in focus group sessions to three common concerns among the industry clusters (see below).

## Need

Through focus group sessions with each of the five key industry clusters, several potential actions were identified that could lead to more robust levels of job creation and economic vitality for Sonoma County. From these actions, three common needs emerged:

1. *Permit process improvement*
2. *Development of an employer-driven workforce strategy; and*
3. *A strategy to drive demand for local goods and services (Sonoma County Identity).*

The IAC presented a plan to the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors to create three taskforces based on the three identified needs of the industry clusters. The taskforces were composed of a broad membership of business, public sector, and education leaders. They were charged with developing an action plan to address the three common needs that emerged during the cluster focus sessions.

## Stewardship

In addition to hearing from subject matter experts and helping to develop action plans to address cluster needs, taskforce participants were encouraged to become champions of proposed actions, and several met on their own with community leaders to discuss moving forward with initiatives. Furthermore, many members of the IAC and taskforces have attended CSN and CA Fwd events, such as the California Economic Summit.

## The Solution: Regional Innovation

### Permit Process Improvement

The taskforce looked at several opportunities for improvement; investigating current practices throughout planning and permitting departments in the county, and looking at the best practices of regions around the country.

The challenge for the taskforce was to balance economic and social considerations (jobs, economic vitality) with environmental considerations (maintaining quality of life and consumer protections). The action proposed by the taskforce did not attempt to change or circumvent existing planning or development rules, but rather to help agencies and customers more successfully operate within the current framework.

### Employer-Driven Workforce

The taskforce proposed the encouragement of work-based learning through an innovative *subsidized employment* program that offset 50% of a new employee's wages throughout the training period, plus other measures to promote apprenticeships, mentorships and internships.

This new public-private workforce development partnership helps to ensure that although most workforce training and readiness is a product of education and public-sector funding, as the largest source of employment, the private sector maintains a key role in influencing the direction of workforce development efforts.

### Sonoma County Identity

The taskforce looked at the local landscape of organizations that promote Sonoma County's products and assets from an array of angles. The group found that over 30 groups exist – with no formal method of collaboration or communication in place.

The taskforce felt this lack of collaboration may result in missed opportunity to fully leverage the unique brand value proposition offered by Sonoma County's wine, quality food, outdoor opportunities, the arts, and other attractions.

## Key Collaborations

California Stewardship Network

Morgan Family Foundation

County of Sonoma

Sonoma County Workforce Investment Board

Sonoma County Innovation Action Council

Sonoma County BEST

## Major Results/Accomplishments

### Permit Process Improvement

As a result of recommendations from the Permit Process Improvement Taskforce, the County planning department (PRMD) is in the process of adopting new permitting technology that will allow for online submissions and tracking of applications.

### Employer-Driven Workforce

Through the Sonoma County Workforce Investment Board (WIB), the Employer-Driven Workforce Taskforce established a new survey of local HR professionals that is now used annually to gauge employer need and sentiment on a broad array of fronts, including STEM training and soft skills.

### Sonoma County Identity

As a result of the actions proposed by the Sonoma County Identity Taskforce, under coordination by Sonoma County Building Economic Success Together (BEST), the over 30 groups identified have been convened to discuss methods of conjunctive branding, cross-marketing products, and using a newly-developed Sonoma County brand mark.

## Strategies

Through the previous work of the IAC, Sonoma County businesses and organizations alike initially agreed that greater success can be achieved by collaborating together, instead of independently. With collaboration in mind, and at the direction of the IAC, each taskforce was composed of a broad cross-section of business, public sector and educational leaders.

It was important for the IAC and the EDB to be clear about what the intentions and outcomes from the taskforces should be before they began their work. For this reason, the taskforces were directed to recommend one action item that, when implemented, would improve the permit process, develop an employer-driven workforce strategy or support a common effort to market local goods and services. The three action items are highlighted above in the Major Results/Accomplishments.

Support for the three taskforces was provided by EDB staff, meeting facilitators and through presentations to the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors for their approval of the identified action items.

### Sonoma County EDB Role

The EDB staff coordinated the actions of the IAC and participated as part of the taskforce project teams for Permit Process Improvement and Employer-Driven Workforce Development. The EDB also presented preliminary and final plans and actions to local political leaders, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, and various representatives from business, non-profits, education and the public sector.

To continue working as stewards and leaders to improve Sonoma County's economy, society and environment, the EDB will begin work in the fall of 2014 to develop a project that will enable Sonoma County businesses to anticipate and reactive proactively to future changes affecting economic trends and industries.